

FAQs about Response Rates and Bias in Online Course Evaluations

- ❖ ***Are the course ratings lower when evaluations are done on line rather than in class?***
 - There was no systematic tendency for course ratings to be either higher or lower with online data collection at any of the institutions studied. (See Reference List that follows.)
- ❖ ***Are response rates lower for online evaluations than for in-class evaluations?***
 - At all five institutions where most research has been conducted, response rates are lower when course evaluations are completed on line as compared to in class.
 - In-class response rates are typically between 60% and 80%.
- ❖ ***Are course ratings biased because only the students who don't like a course respond on line?***
 - At all universities, including McGill, there was no bias due to the method of data collection. In other words, students with a range of opinions about a course complete the evaluations. There were no differences in the average ratings or their distributions between online and in-class evaluations.
- ❖ ***Why not stay with in-class evaluations to get a higher response rate?***
 - Although in-class response rates are higher, good response rates alone do not ensure the validity of the results. In general, lower response rates do not necessarily result in less representative responses.
- ❖ ***What are the advantages of an online system?***
 - Enhanced data analysis and communication
 - rapid turnaround time for professors to get results; hours vs. months after submitting grades
 - standardized reporting functions available within units and University-wide
 - supports custom analyses
 - facilitates dissemination of results
 - provides secure archiving
 - An online system offers every student equal access to the evaluation process
 - every student enrolled in the course has a voice; missing one class does not silence a student
 - Improved administrative efficiencies
 - easy to standardize and customize forms
 - reduced workload for administrative staff in the academic units
 - lower costs
 - Improved data quality
 - increased quantity and quality of comments
 - increased anonymity for students
 - Reduced environmental impact
 - reduces paper consumption by eliminating paper questionnaires, computer response sheets and reports to professors, unit heads, and students

Reference List

McGill University

- Analyzed data from 93 courses in 4 departments from 2005 and 2003/2004
- Looked at instances when the same instructor taught the same course and compared online evaluations (2005) and in-class paper evaluations (either 2003 or 2004)
- There was no significant difference on the mean rating, shape of distribution or standard deviation for any of the courses.
- There was no systematic increase or decrease in the confidence intervals of the means.
- There was no systematic tendency for results to be either higher or lower with online data collection.

Winer, L.R. & Sehgal, R. (2006, April) *Online Course Evaluation Analysis Report*. McGill University. (http://www.mcgill.ca/files/tls/online_course_evaluation_report.pdf)

Brigham Young University

- 74 course sections evaluated both online and paper; there was no evidence that lower response rates resulted in lower ratings.
- online ratings appear to be less susceptible to response rate bias

Johnson, T.D. (2003, Winter) Online Student Ratings: Will Students Respond? *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 96, pp. 49-59. (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/tl.122>)

Cornell University

- Study in the Department of Economics; sample of 7 professors who each taught the same course over a three year period (total of 29 evaluations); in two cases the course was taught twice in the same semester, evaluated once online and once in-class.
- The online response rates were lower but they did not affect the average evaluation scores.

Avery, R.J., Bryant, W.K., Mathios, A., Kang, H. & Bell, D. (2006, Winter). Electronic Course Evaluations: Does an Online Delivery System Influence Student Evaluations? *Journal of Economic Education*, pp. 22-37. (<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=bth&AN=20018437&site=ehost-live>)

CSU, Northridge

- 16 instructors teaching the same course twice per semester; one evaluated online, the other in-class
- There was no overall effect for data collection method; when separate analyses were performed, there was a difference for only one instructor.
- Modest grade incentive (0.25%) did have an impact on response rate without influencing results.

Dommeier, C.J., Baum, P., Hanna, R.W. & Chapman, K.S. (2004, Oct). Gathering faculty teaching evaluations by in-class and online surveys: their effects on response rates and evaluations. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 29(5), pp. 611-623. (<http://www.informaworld.com/openurl?genre=article&issn=0260-2938&volume=29&issue=5&spage=611>)

Unnamed southeastern university.

- Data from 66 courses from 5 disciplinary areas that were randomly assigned to online or paper.
- There was no effect for the method of data collection, nor was there any interaction between the method and the disciplinary area.

Layne, B.H., DeCristoforo, J.R. & McGinty, D. (1999). Electronic versus traditional student ratings of instruction. *Research in Higher Education*, 40(2), pp 221 -232. (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1023/A:1018738731032>)

For an extensive review of many of the issues related to course evaluations, please see Gravestock & Gregor-Greenleaf, (2008). *Student Course Evaluations: Research, Models and Trends*. Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.

(<http://www.heqco.ca/SiteCollectionDocuments/Student%20Course%20Evaluations.pdf>)